

First Sunday in Lent
Saint Dunstan's Church, Houston, TX
18 February 2024

Mark 1:9-15

We have heard the divine words from heaven in the Gospel of Mark three times during the last two months: When we celebrated the Baptism of Jesus, when we celebrated the episode of the Transfiguration, and again today on the First Sunday of Lent. The passage has three movements: Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized by John, he is thrown into the dessert by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan, and the start of Jesus' public ministry after John is arrested. It is as though the three events of this passage are an Oreo Cookie: The outer layers are Baptism by John and the start of the public ministry after the arrest of John. The gooey center is the episode of testing in the dessert. Today, I want to talk about this center: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

Mark has the shortest episode in the wilderness of any of the three Synoptic Gospels. Absent from his account of this experience are the great battles between Jesus and the Devil. You remember that both Luke and Matthew tell us what the temptations were. In Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13) we see the Devil attack Jesus' identity: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Then, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the highest point of the temple." And finally, after testing his identity, the Devil tests his obedience and loyalty to God, in other words, he tests his vocation, "All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me." These are dramatic battles, which Jesus wins by using Scripture and by remaining faithful to the Father. But in Mark, we hear nothing. We don't know what Satan tells Jesus or how Jesus defends itself. There is complete and absolute silence. For Mark the fact that the temptations happen is somehow more important than how they happen.

Many commentators have noticed the difference between the language used by Mark and the language used by Matthew and Luke. In Mark, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness, in fact, the expression is quite strong. He was thrown into the wilderness (Cast out!) Both Matthew and Luke use the more gentle expression, "He was led" by the spirit into the wilderness. All three tell us that Jesus was tempted, but Mark uses the more Hebrew word Satan, whereas Matthew and Luke use the more Greek word Devil. And lastly, Matthew and Luke are rather formulaic: Three temptations or tests and three responses from Jesus. Mark, on the

other hand, simply says that he was tempted or tested, but doesn't tell us how many times, in what way, or how Jesus defended himself. The word used in this passage can mean both "To tempt," and "To test." But it is a word used frequently by Mark and it seldom refers to Satan. "Every other time peirazo is used in Mark, the 'testers' are human beings (always Pharisees): asking for a sign from heaven (8:11); asking about the legality of divorce (10:2); and with the Herodians, asking about paying taxes (12:15). (<https://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark1x9.htm>).

In the Synoptic Gospels there is a sense that the name Satan can be applied to humans as well, and it is not always a supernatural force. In Mark 8:33, for example, Jesus calls Peter, "Satan," and tells him, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Perhaps the real enemy is anything or anyone who drives us away from divine things. Any force that places stumbling blocks on our path and makes it difficult for us to hear the voice of God and to follow in his steps. In a way, I am glad that Mark didn't tell us how many temptations or tests there were in the wilderness. Perhaps the wilderness is full of temptations and many of them come from other humans, from well meaning people like Peter who try very hard to protect us, but by doing so, they actually place stumbling blocks in our way.

Yes, there is a sense that God allows our faith to be tested, but these tests are always for our edification. They build us up and God always provides the means to strengthen ourselves to overcome these tests. If we are willing, he gives us all we need to strengthen our faith. The Spirit is active in our lives and it is always available to us when we need him. Temptation to sin, sinning, and resistance to sin are all acts of the will. Whether there were three temptations as Matthew and Luke tells us, or innumerable temptations as could be possible in Mark, the Spirit is always with us and God's angels continue to minister to us. We are able to resist temptation. We are able to do better. We can amend our lives if we choose, but none of these things can ever happen without God's Holy Spirit in our lives. As Jesus himself tells us, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matt 26:41.)

We too live in the wilderness, in the valley of the shadow of death, and we are confronted daily with both tests and temptations. The tests build our faith and our character. These tests could be a particularly antagonistic political climate, financial reversals, a news media saturated with violence and fear mongering, medical issues, interpersonal conflicts, etc. These tests can help us become more empathic and loving. They can help us to increase our dependence on God and his grace in our lives. They can make us better sisters and brothers, better children, better parents, better citizens, and better Christians. The tests are often very hard,

but nothing has the power to separate us from the love of God in our lives and no tests are too much for Christ to bear.

Temptations and tempters have no concern to strengthen our faith or our devotion. The purpose of temptation is to trip us up, to lessen our resolve, to test our boundaries, to weaken our defenses. The temptation to give up and stop trying to be a better human is a real temptation. The temptation to seek revenge when others offend us, to cut corners when things get tough, to treat others as means to an end and not as brothers and sisters, to choose the easy way out, to lose our hope and compromise our faith. All these temptations make us less of what God created us to be. And these temptations are real and present in each of our lives.

Today, as we enter more fully into our Season of Lent, let us ask God to give us his Holy Spirit to walk alongside us, strengthening our faith to deal with all tests in our life, and helping us withstand the assaults of all tempters, especially those with names we can easily remember.

May God continue to bless you. Amen!